

Golden Pheasant

Outside the gate of my parent's condo complex in western Florida was a small strip mall that housed a vape store and a massage parlor. As we exited the complex together one afternoon during the week I was visiting, my brother casually pointed to the massage parlor and said he got handjobs there. He'd tell our parents he was going for a swim only to instead visit the massage parlor and pay for a handjob, always from the same woman. He felt he was one or two visits away from moving beyond simple handjobs, but that woman had left the parlor unexpectedly and my brother hadn't been back since, though I don't know if it was because he had a penchant only for that one woman or if it took too great an effort to start what must have been a delicate arrangement with someone else. I felt an isolated tension as my brother went on to describe the body of the woman who gave him handjobs, but there was also a more innocent pleasure in learning what my little brother was up to these days, much in the same way I had once liked learning about his first girlfriend, or would one day like learning what his future children were studying in school.

We were driving to buy a new pack of playing cards. Over the course of the week I'd become addicted to spades, a game my brother learned during a brief stint in jail, and the deck we had been using was destroyed by a spilled drink on the glass patio table the night before. It was harder to find a pack of cards than we would have guessed—neither drugstore in the area carried them. Our last resort was a nearby Barnes & Noble. Our mother called my brother as soon as we arrived at the bookstore, sounding somewhat frantic and demanding we return home

immediately to take care of my father, who could be heard yelling indiscriminately in the background. My brother spoke down to her like she was a stranger's dog. After he hung up, I asked if we should abandon our search for playing cards, but my brother said we shouldn't pay any attention to our mother. He had been living with them since graduating high school a decade ago and was now essentially my father's primary caretaker, so I figured he knew best. As we walked between the half-empty shelves of the bookstore, my brother received another phone call, this time from our father, who in slurred words asked us to also buy some board games—Trivial Pursuit, Monopoly, and something like Risk, as two friends along with their wives had flown down from Michigan that day to see him, and my father had the thought that everyone would cram into our one-bedroom vacation condo after dinner to play games and drink bourbon, presumably like old times (it's hard to imagine my father and his friends ever played Trivial Pursuit, but I knew why he wanted us to buy that game—earlier that week, when I had first arrived in Florida, my brother and I took my father to the small brewery in town for their trivia night which we had easily won thanks to me, in fact the only time that night I turned to my father for guidance was for a sports question, which resulted in the only time that night he did not sit in his wheelchair with a vacant look in his eye and his arms resting heavy in his lap (one of his arms already effectively dead from the brain tumor pressing against his motor neurons), meaning he suddenly became animated and answered me, and when the scores were totaled up at the end of the night I found out we won by a margin of twenty, but I told my father that it was an extremely close call and were it not for his assistance on the sports question we would have lost, a lie he seemed to believe, for whenever he talked about the trivia night over the next few days, he was sure to mention that it was his answer that pushed us over the line, which ostensibly made

me happy as it was the intended effect of the lie, but that happiness could never completely clear the frustration I felt when he said this, for it was actually my trivia knowledge that had won us the game, not his, just as that happiness could never completely clear the strangeness I felt at the end of trivia night when I had first told him we had won, and all my father did was look at me like he was scared before telling me his head hurt and he wanted to go home, but regardless my father seemed to think himself the trivia master now and wanted to show that mastery off to his friends in a game of Trivial Pursuit (I set up a purposeful and clever reassessment of this shortsighted thinking a few paragraphs later in this story, but it occurs to me now as I edit my sentences that my father also might have considered our trivia victory a piece of crucial evidence in his fight against terminal brain cancer since it was proof he still had some grasp of knowledge and control, proof his brain was still more than excess tissue), however the only game Barnes & Noble had was an expensive edition of Backgammon, which we bought with my father's credit card. As we were leaving, I finally noticed the flyers on the door announcing the store was going out of business, which was why it felt so desolate inside and everything was priced to sell.

We again passed the strip mall with the massage parlor on the way back to the condo complex, and I was tempted to inquire further about my brother's experiences getting handjobs, but I was stopped because I wasn't quite sure how to ask in a way that protected my own reputation. I wanted to know where he learned how to do such things, if he had learned those things from my father, a man who had once told me unprompted that a real prostitute never carried a purse and a man who liked to print out pictures of topless women on card stock and stick them between the pages of the books he kept in his office, or if my brother had developed this sort of habit on his own. When we got back to our condo, my mother refused to greet us. We

helped my father out of his chair and took turns wiping off his penis and the intimate part of his thighs. He had pissed himself while we gone, something he did whenever either my brother or mother left home for more than twenty minutes or so at a time (when they were both home, he could go hours without urinating). This must have been why our mother had called us. We then put him back in his electric recliner and slowly rolled fresh underwear and pants up his legs and waist (it occurs to me only now that a diaper would have helped—I wonder if this was considered by anyone else in my family). Afterwards, we put compression socks on his legs, a task made difficult because his feet and calves were supernaturally swollen, his skin translucent like grease on a paper bag and his toes swallowed up by edema like moai at Easter Island.

When we finished putting the socks on, we made him something he called Grandma's Tea, which was just black tea with milk and sugar, this apparently the way his grandmother liked her tea when he was a boy. That my father gave it idiosyncratic name was pathetic (equally pathetic were the early evenings we sat around his electric recliner to spend time with him only for him to say he preferred to Go Camping instead, which to him meant pulling a blanket over his head with a slight pitch in the fabric above his mouth and nose (a shape that presumably formed the tent) and sitting in silence as the rest of us talked in hushed voices, though sometimes an inch or two of the blanket would slip and I could see one of his eyes wide open, staring straight ahead, though never once did I think he was listening), though this new habit of his did not disgust me nearly as much as the times I heard him call my mother Mom. He would spend hours each night rhythmically dropping his working arm onto his chest while he shouted Mom. The tumor cleaving both hemispheres of his brain into the inner-wall of his skull was hurting him. He shouted Mom because he wanted my mother to help him. Though she was in bed beside

him, he shouted it with a force you would use if someone was far away but still reachable, like the other side of the house or across a gentle river (like the concept of diaper wearing, it occurs to me only now that this could be interpreted as my father calling out to his own deceased mother, though this would be overly kitsch and Dickensian, even for my father (my father claimed his favorite play was *A Christmas Carol* (his favorite novel: *To Kill a Mockingbird*; favorite movie: *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*; favorite actor: Robert Downey Jr.; favorite radio station: Smooth Jazz V98.7; favorite television show: *Two and a Half Men*; favorite restaurant: Roy's Hawaiian Fusion; favorite relative: Grandpa Sullivan), and in the week after he was diagnosed, he wanted to bring the four of us to a local production of the play—my mother told him no, she didn't want to go because she didn't like that crap, and from the other side of the house he shouted back at her that she had held him back from doing the things he loved all his life, and she said nothing in return but instead stood over the sink with her eyes shut tight and tears streaming down her cheeks, and I sat the kitchen table thinking how horrifying this was for both of them)). His incessant shouting wearied both my brother and mother to the point they'd tell him to shut up, saying his head was going to keep hurting because he had a brain tumor and there was nothing they could do about that, but even yelling at him did nothing to stop his moaning (all this happening while I laid in the condo's living room on an air mattress with a blanket pulled over my head, my eyes wide open and staring straight ahead, listening to everything). After we brought him his Grandma's Tea, we watched *Family Feud* together.

Our plan for the night was to eat dinner at the golf course clubhouse with my father's friends and their wives visiting from Michigan. Like most condo complexes in Florida, ours was situated on a golf course. The clubhouse had a full bar and restaurant with a set dinner service

each night. My brother and I would go there as children when my maternal grandparents still owned the condo and order virgin strawberry daiquiris charged to the tab. Our mother took our father into the bedroom to dress him while my brother took his turn getting ready in the bathroom. I sat at the glass table on the patio where we spent our evenings playing cards, looking out onto the fourth hole. Heavy black storm clouds sat in the distance, and the old men still out playing golf were hightailing it back to the clubhouse before the rain came in.

When we were children, our grandfather would bring my brother and I out to the patio at night so we could hear the exotic cries of bobcat, tropical birds, and frogs. Compared to the Michigan suburbs where we lived, it felt like a jungle, especially with the palms and mangrove trees obscuring the light of the moon and neighboring buildings. My grandfather wanted a better view of the golf course, so one day he killed most of trees by driving poisoned nails into their trunks. The raindrops no longer pattered on their fronds, but instead slapped against the concrete walls. That impersonal sound was all I soon heard as I sat on the patio waiting for my brother to get ready while my mother found clothes she could easily put on my father—she had an entire closet’s selection at her disposal, as my father had purchased a large amount of golf appropriate pants and polos the year prior to his diagnosis, for he intended to spend his retirement down here in Florida. That closet full of clothes never to be worn struck me as such a sad detail yet also so pedestrian that instead of feeling sorrow for my mother whenever I imagined her shuffling through the hangers of colorful polos with tears in her eyes, I felt contempt instead, as if this singular moment of her life was plucked straight from kitsch, which then made me wonder if this contempt I felt was not a sign that some part of me wanted both of my parents to try a bit harder, that I wanted them to dig a little deeper and find a stronger way to suffer and die (I feel forced to

admit that this line of thinking ultimately led to the realization that I hated myself for feeling anything but compassion and grief and that I hated literature for making me feel that life must be mined for singular experiences, that moments such as my mother shuffling through a closet full of colorful synthetic golf polos must be crystalline in order to have value, though perhaps I am mistaken in that belief and in fact my mother shuffling through colorful synthetic unworn golf polos is literature).

The storm soon stopped, and the brief reprieve from the heat brought by the rain condensed into humidity as the sun broke through the clouds. I went to the bathroom so I could fix my hair and look my best in preparation for dinner at the clubhouse with my father's friends and their wives. While I was looking into the mirror, everything suddenly went black. The power had gone out. Back in the living room, my father was sitting in his wheelchair waiting to go. The lights were out, the TV was off, and the fan overhead stopped spinning. He asked me what happened and I told him, to which he said nothing, though a few moments later he said we should probably go soon. I agreed with him and went out to main hall to see that it had not just been our condo but the entire building that lost power. I ignored the eyes of the neighbors and went to the elevator to see if we could still use it to bring my father down to the ground floor, but the buttons did not respond.

I walked back inside to see my father unmoved and staring ahead. He told me it was time to go now. My brother told me the clubhouse still had power, and my father's friends and their wives were already sitting at a table waiting for us. My mother reported that the property management wasn't sure of the outage's cause. It was only effecting our building, and it could be anywhere from twenty minutes to three hours before the power came back on. I broke the bad

news that the elevator wasn't working, which induced a small silence onto everyone except my father, who didn't seem to understand the implication. My brother and I debated the plausibility of carrying my father down the stairs in his wheelchair like he was a piece of furniture, but it was clear that the risks outweighed the reward, for my father was a heavy man (after his diagnosis, he would jokingly say that he didn't plan on dying skinny, so he ate just about everything he could get his hands on, such as cheeseburgers, ice cream pints, pudding cups, snack cakes, milk chocolate candies, frozen egg rolls, potato chips, microwaved brownies, and everything else in that nature, meaning anything ultra-processed and delicious, which was the food he ate his entire life but had consciously cut back in recent years in efforts to improve his overall health, so while eating junk food was very much a return to form for him, it made me wonder if those types of ultra-processed foods were not in some way responsible for the incurable brain tumor that he developed (as his son, I had regrettably developed the same tastes during my childhood, so of course I also wondered what this meant for me)—as for his own theories on why he developed brain cancer, the only evidence I had was gathered when I first flew back to Michigan to see him after his diagnosis (when he suggested we see *A Christmas Carol*), and the two of us sat on the couch together watching *Family Feud* and every so often he would say he had tried to do everything right his entire life in terms of health and wellness, that he he did everything the experts told him in order to live a long life, utterances to which I had no reply whatsoever, so all I could do was stay silent and continue watching *Family Feud* (I wish I could say I reached out and squeezed his hand since I couldn't find the words, but this would be a lie, in truth I was paralyzed by awkwardness, not knowing what to say to a dying man, which was undoubtedly one of the last failures I would ever provide to my father), though now, in Florida, after surgery

and multiple rounds of chemotherapy he lost his taste even for these ultra-processed foods (the chemotherapy was somewhat responsible for this loss of taste, but the real culprit was the bout my father had with Covid (he had refused the vaccine because he thought it would alter his DNA, a piece of trivia both too coincidental and grossly contemporary to fit into a piece of fiction), which left him altered tastebuds for the short rest of life)). Our only option was to wait for the power to be restored.

It was too hot to stay in the condo, so we wheeled our father out onto the small balcony near the elevator that overlooked the parking lot. I got two beers out the fridge for myself and my brother, and we slowly drank them on the balcony in impenetrable disappointment. Every so often, my father would reach up with his good arm to press the elevator call button and ask us why it wasn't working. For some reason, my brother went downstairs and pulled both my father's cars to the front of the building which provided a perfect view of the expensive Audi crossover SUV my father had leased a few weeks prior despite being unable to drive it (the only reason he leased it at all was because my mother had totaled his old car on the way back from the hospital after an unsuccessful brain surgery to remove his tumor when she slammed into the back of a van that had run out of gas in the middle lane on the highway (this too being trivia that feels too coincidental to fit into a piece of fiction, and even when it happened, when I stood with my mother on the shoulder of the highway as we waited for the police and fire truck to arrive while she cried and screamed that she wanted nothing to do with me (I had been driving in front of her and swerved out of the way at the last possible moment), it felt too coarse to have a refined meaning, which is why I've refrained from fictionalizing it), which my father responded to by leasing a new Audi with the eventual hope that he would recover from surgery to the point where

he could drive himself to chemotherapy, a hope that ended up being overly optimistic, just as the decision to lease a car in the first place was overly optimistic given his diagnosis (though perhaps his decision to lease was actually practical according to that same criteria), but in any case he did get to ride in it for a good portion of time, as immediately after his chemotherapy treatments in Michigan ended, my brother drove him to Florida in the Audi, as going down to Florida was the only thing my father looked forward to after chemotherapy) and the automatic-transmission 2014 Camaro he bought the same year he purchased this condo from my maternal grandparents. My mother wheeled my father to the edge of the balcony as my brother stood between both cars, a cigar between his lips and his arms spread out. With bravado, he asked my father if he saw the two cars, if he saw the legacy he built that he was leaving behind, to which my father only stared at a spot toward the ground six inches in front of him before asking if it was time to go.

When the sun finally set and the power still wasn't on, we decided to call my father's friends and their wives and regrettably cancel our plans for the evening. We lit candles inside the condo while my brother went to get Burger King. I was leaving the next day, so I finished packing my suitcase. For the first time, it occurred to me that my father asked us to buy Trivial Pursuit because he wanted to show his friends how good I was at trivia, that he had raised a smart son. My father ate half of a junior cheeseburger. The lights came on in the house around midnight.

The next morning, I had a few hours to spare before I had to leave for the small regional airport. My father didn't sleep that night. When my mother tried to get him up and dressed for the day, my father slowly fell to the ground and decided to stay there, so my mother put a pillow underneath his head and a blanket over him. She then asked if I could stay with my father while

she walked the dog and my brother went swimming. I sat on the couch reading a book I brought with me, listening to my father snore. His snoring soon turned into gurgling. A grayish green bile flowed out his mouth, though he was still sleeping. I tried waking him up, but he was unresponsive. I tried my best to roll him over so his face was no longer in the bile, but it was difficult on account of his aforementioned heaviness. I used one of his towels from the bathroom to clean up, but most of the liquid had already soaked into the plush accent rug. I called my brother, but he didn't answer. I called my mother who quickly came home. My father was still sleeping, so we both figured it was an unlucky bout of food poisoning, as Burger King had never sat well with my father (he must have only ate half his junior cheeseburger for a reason). My brother wasn't yet back from swimming, and my mother couldn't leave my father alone, so I took a taxi to the airport.

I coincidentally landed in Michigan for a layover and saw my had mother called me. Apparently, while I was in the air, my father had thrown up bile a few more times and remained unresponsive. They rushed him to the hospital via ambulance. The doctors intubated him and gave my mother the impression that once the tube was pulled, it would be my father's curtain call. I was to get back on the next plane to Florida immediately. As soon as I heard the news, my legs started to shake and I doubted I'd be able to find the nearest airport bar, much less make it there (this was similar to the pattern of reaction I had when my mother first called me to tell me my father's diagnosis back in autumn—they had been at the hospital all day, concerned hypertension was causing my father's headaches and she called me to report the actual diagnosis just as I had arrived at the grocery store to buy some ingredients for dinner, so I ended up telling the cashier my father had just been diagnosed with stage four brain cancer, the same kind John

McCain had (words repeated verbatim from my mother), something I said with the candor typical of the recently shocked and afflicted, a candor that I think acts as a last line of defense for your psyche in that it is bonding your experience to another (if someone else has knowledge of your tragedy, then it must make sense on some level), and as a last resort offense in that it states your situation so bluntly the listener has no choice but to reply in some way, even if that reply is a cold-shoulder (this is why we feel an isolated tension when we are accosted with this candor by coworkers, strangers at the bus stop, or homeless who come to our car windows).

I searched for flights with tears in my eyes, and the bartender let me drink for free. The next flight available was a red eye that had an overnight stop in Newark, so I drank until 11pm and got on a small plane. The only other passengers were a high school hockey team and a nun who sat across the aisle for me. I wanted to ask her to pray for me, but I was too drunk and ashamed she'd notice. I spent the night on the floor in the Newark airport, getting up every so often to use the bathroom, once even jacking off in the stall, thinking about the types of masseuses my brother might see at the massage parlor, hoping it would relieve my stress, but all it did was give me a vague paranoia that I could have gotten an STD from the tip of my penis touching the rim of the toilet bowl, but that fear soon dissipated when I went back to my spot on the floor and closed my eyes.

I saw my father in the Florida hospital with a tube down his throat and a handful of diodes taped to his chest. My mother's goodbye was both loud and intensely private. She thanked my dad for providing her with the life they had lived, such as the vacations, condos, Camaros, and Audis (this sounds like I'm being sarcastic or even flippant, but at the time I promise it was heart-wrenching to watch and hear, even if it also made me also consider how

unwelcome proper nouns were in a final goodbye), which was the second out of the three sad things I saw my mother do during my father's illness, the first of which happened when I first flew home after he was diagnosed (they played their wedding song on a Bluetooth speaker and slow danced while they cried), and the third of which happens in the paragraph after the following. The doctors then took the tube out, and we waited for the heart rate monitor to stop, which we were told could happen anywhere in the space of minutes to hours, though for my father the heart rate monitor did not stop at all and he clung on well beyond anyone's expectations. The next morning the decision was made to bring him back to the condo on hospice care.

He was awake for a very brief time when we brought him back to the condo and laid him on the thin mattress in the living room where he would die a few days later. In that brief time, I had him FaceTime my wife, who had not come with me to Florida originally as I expected only a short trip—I told her she should continue to stay home even in light of this new development, as not only were things hectic, but we also had a dog to take care of and plane tickets were expensive (I was allowed to use my mother's credit card to purchase the quick return flight to Florida, and she later complained that I hadn't taken the time to search for a better price), which were two excuses I used to justify denying my wife any goodbye to my father outside that of a small phone screen (I recall him looking at the phone like it was an object of uncertain purpose, almost like I had placed it in the hands of a gorilla, and he only nodded and responded when instructed), a denial that would cause more than one fight between my wife and I (part of me felt that we'd have the chance to do things right the next time my father died, or perhaps a part of me felt that my father dying wasn't worth spending the money and effort to bring my wife out to

Florida, or perhaps I was just not thoughtful of others). Shortly after the FaceTime call with my wife, my father fell into a coma that lasted the rest of his life. A sound like a percolating coffee pot bubbled from his chest in the hours that followed and was soon accompanied by a white foam that spilled out of his nose and mouth. My brother, mother, and I took shifts sitting at my father's bed side, using a turkey baster to constantly pump the white foam out of his mouth and deposit it in a trash can at the bed side, taking note every few hours to shoot morphine into the back of his mouth with a tiny syringe. This lasted for a few days.

We shuffled the electric recliner my father used to Go Camping next to the hospice bed so my mother could recline the chair to it's maximum extension as a makeshift bed in the living room. I got to sleep in their bedroom while my brother took the guest room. One of the nights, I laid awake in my parent's bed listening to my mother talk to my father, telling him how good of a life he gave her, how much she loved him, how he always took care of her, how much she would miss him, how there would never be another apart from him, and how she didn't know if things would ever be okay, all words that bled into each other and were punctuated by sobs and tears. A repeat of what I heard at the hospital, though perhaps it is better to call it a symmetry. When minutes passed without a sound aside from my father's coffee pot gurgling, I went out to the living room to see if she was still awake, only to see she had curled up and moved as much of her body onto my father's hospice bed as space allowed, and I took a picture of this intense and personal moment, as if it were a scene I'd one day want to revisit. It sits on my phone to this day, that picture with no certain purpose (if I was writing this as an essay and not as a piece of fiction, I would include the photo here, but looking back at it now, it looks very anticlimactic, for the medical instruments are just out of frame and my mother was not as curled up on my father's

hospice bed as I originally thought, so it merely looks like they are a couple who could only afford a twin sized bed).

The day after my father died, my brother and I went to a small private zoo that held a few small alligators and exotic birds near the brewery in the middle of town. An employee cleaning one of the large bird cages used a high-powered hose to spray the bird poop off the concrete floor, a process that fascinated my brother who had smoked so much weed he didn't notice the ejected bird poop flecking against his shins. In the back of the zoo were ornate botanical cages with manicured gardens and running waterfalls that looked like something out of pre-war Berlin. One of the cages held three golden pheasants. The birds had vibrant golden backs, blood red breasts, and accents of green, blue, and black across their bodies. They walked around their large cage slowly folding and unfolding their feathers with a quiet dignity. My brother and I both stood transfixed. The late-morning sun shining through the bars of the cage gave their feathers an iridescent quality. When all of this was over, I thought, I want to raise these birds myself. This has yet to happen, but I am grateful that the image of the three golden pheasants is one that returns to me when I think of the last week of my father's life, as I have three birds with colorful schemas to occupy space in my mind, living creatures that are completely removed from handjobs, power outages, wives, failure, and white foam. At the same time, the golden pheasants are regrettably tied to the structure of the week my father died, thus it follows I cannot return to the pheasants without also returning to that week.